

Monson's Refusal to Testify

Last Updated: October 20, 2013

- [Abstract](#)
- [Introduction](#)
- [Why It Matters](#)
- [Supporting Observations](#)
- [Potential Objections](#)
- [Alternative Explanations](#)
- [Possible Implications](#)
- [Conclusion & Proposal](#)
- [Additional Reading](#)

Abstract

Thomas S. Monson, the president of the LDS Church, has not borne testimony of any of his church's unique foundational doctrines – including the truth of the Book of Mormon or the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith – in any of the church's General Conference meetings since October of 2005. A way for readers to verify this fact is provided and its significance is discussed. The hypotheses that this avoidance is intentional and that Monson does not fully believe in these doctrines are proposed and supported with numerous evidences and lines of argument. Several anticipated objections and alternative explanations (including the most common – that the church is mainstreaming) are considered and refuted. Plausible ideas on where Monson stands in his beliefs and on what may have led him to this position are presented. A call to action for church members and researchers is issued.

Introduction

In February 2008, Thomas S. Monson succeeded Gordon B. Hinckley as the president and prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Since that time, he has given 51 talks in 12 Semiannual General Conferences and during the two years prior, he gave 10 talks in 4 such Conferences. In many of these 61 talks over the last eight years, he has borne witness of his beliefs, in keeping with LDS custom and doctrine. Interestingly, however, in none of them has he testified of the church's unique foundational claims, including the historicity of the Book of Mormon, the divine calling of Joseph Smith, the restoration of the priesthood, or the status of the church's top leaders as prophets, seers, and revelators. This is rather surprising given the enthusiastic encouragement Mormons frequently receive from their leaders (including President Monson himself) to make such testimonies a regular part of the lessons they teach, the talks they give, and the lives they live. It is also surprising because, as will be shown, Monson has not always behaved this way and does not behave this way in regards to other types of principles.

While doing this research and drawing this conclusion, I have referred to the LDS Church's own statement on what it means to bear testimony:

To bear witness by the power of the Holy Ghost; to make a solemn declaration of truth based on personal knowledge or belief. ([The Guide to the Scriptures, "Testify"](#))

To allow you to verify these findings yourself, I have copied (directly from [the church's website](#)) all 61 of Monson's Conference talks from the last eight years into a Word document that [you can access here](#). In a matter of minutes or hours, you can read or scan the concluding remarks of each talk, where testimonies are usually borne, and then search through the talks (using the keyboard shortcut Ctrl+F) for the following words and phrases (or any others you think might accompany an LDS testimony): "I know", "I testify", "I believe", "I declare", "I bear", "I have a", "I have the", "I am certain", "my testimony", "my witness", "my personal", "it is my", "is true", "is a true", "was a true", "Joseph", "Book of Mormon", "prophet", "restore", "restoration". You can then read the context around each word/phrase to see if a testimony is present. Also, note that all verses of scripture referenced herein, some of which are from the LDS scriptures, [can be read here](#).

This essay will explore Monson's talks and other sources in order to explain why these glaring omissions from his testimonies matter, show that they are probably intentional, and discuss what we can induce from them. It contains 115 references (**not** including those that point to other sections of the essay) and is the result of a serious research project that I conducted as carefully, thoroughly, and impartially as I was able. It is not anti-Mormon nor is it pro-Mormon, and I believe I have written it as respectfully and objectively as the subject matter allows. My primary aim has been to gain and provide novel insight into the heart and mind of a public figure who is regarded as a prophet, seer, and revelator and is beloved by millions around the world. I also hope to offer ideas and raise questions that will provide food for thought and fodder for discussion in the Mormon community.

Admittedly, this turned out to be longer than I had planned, but you can shorten it by more than half if you'd like by clicking on the link provided at the end of the next section. This link will let you skip over the subsequent three sections, which are important and interesting but mainly have the purpose of supporting and defending the findings of my research rather than discussing their implications and putting them into context with supplemental information, as the rest of the paper does. If you do skip these sections, I recommend that you come back to them later.

After reading this essay, see also "Packer's Reluctance to Testify", which shows that Boyd K. Packer, the president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles who is set to succeed Monson as the president of the church, has also been slow to testify of fundamental unique doctrines in General Conference. He has gone **17 years** (34 talks) without bearing an unequivocal testimony of the existence of modern prophets and **27.5 years** (55 talks) without testifying unequivocally of Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, or the restoration of the priesthood despite the fact that his testimonies of basic Christian doctrines have been bold, lucid, and frequent. Unlike Monson, he has actually borne a few *equivocal* testimonies

of some of these principles in recent years, which is why the word “Refusal” in the paper’s title has been replaced by the softer “Reluctance”. Note that, as of the “Last Updated” date shown above, this essay is not finished yet but will be available on Scribd.com when it is.

Why It Matters

Since Latter-day Saints are regularly encouraged to bear testimony of the beliefs that separate their church from every other in the world, the fact that the church’s own president is not doing so is hardly trivial and deserves an explanation. It should be of concern not only because it seems unbecoming of a prophet by LDS standards but because it is condemned in the LDS scriptures, as the late President James E. Faust once noted:

Some of us are naturally reserved and timid about bearing our testimony with words. Perhaps we should not be so timid. The Doctrine and Covenants tells us, “But with some I am not well pleased, for they will not open their mouths, but they hide the talent which I have given unto them, because of the fear of man” (D&C 60:2). ([“The Importance of Bearing Testimony”](#), Ensign, Mar. 1997)

Later in this article, Faust declared that “there are four **absolutes** about which it is **always** appropriate to testify:

The first is that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior, the Mediator and Redeemer of the world.

The second is that **Joseph Smith was a prophet of God and reestablished the Church of Christ upon the earth** with its keys and authority.

The third is that **all of the Presidents of the Church since Joseph Smith have been successors** in that power and authority.

The fourth is that President **Gordon B. Hinckley is the only prophet of God upon the earth**, holding all of the keys, powers, and authorities of the Church in the earth today.”

Notice that three of these “absolutes” are uniquely Mormon claims. More recently, an official church magazine (approved by the highest church leadership, including Monson himself) instructed children to “make your own ‘testimony glove’ to help you remember five parts of your testimony... There are **essential** parts to a testimony” ([see the image provided](#)). It then lists them as follows:

1. I know that God is our Heavenly Father and He loves us.
2. I know that His Son, Jesus Christ, is our Savior and Redeemer.

3. **I know that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God. He restored the gospel of Jesus Christ to the earth and translated the Book of Mormon by the power of God.**
4. **I know that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the Lord's Church on the earth today.**
5. **I know that this Church is led by a living prophet who receives revelation.** (“[Testimony Glove](#)”, Friend, Oct. 2008)

In this list, again three of the “essential parts” refer to unique LDS beliefs. It’s important to realize that these two lists are not anomalous but are highly reflective of modern LDS culture, doctrine, and lesson material. For example, the testimonies borne in fast-and-testimony meeting each month are generally described quite well by these lists.

Apostles like Dallin H. Oaks have articulated the grave importance of bearing such testimonies in public. In a 2008 session of General Conference, Oaks said:

Those who have a testimony of **the restored gospel** also **have a duty** to share it... Those who have the gift to know **have an obvious duty** to bear their witness... **There has never been a greater need** for us to profess our faith, privately and **publicly** (see D&C 60:2)... **We need to affirm... the reality of the Restoration.** (“[Testimony](#)”, Apr. 2008)

Finally, Monson himself has urged the membership to testify of the church’s unique fundamentals more than once as well. Just several months ago, for example (another example will be given later), he encouraged priesthood holders to:

“Lift up your voices and testify... Declare your witness concerning **the Book of Mormon.**” (“Come, All Ye Sons of God”, Apr. 2013)

He then told a story about a man whose conversion process was sparked when a missionary proclaimed to him the following:

I testify to you that **Joseph was a prophet.** He *did* translate the Book of Mormon. He saw God the Father and Jesus the Son. I know it.

Monson then immediately said to the congregation, “Brethren, teach the truth with testimony”, implying that they should use similar words in their testimonies. One can’t help but classify these admonitions as hypocritical and wonder why the Lord’s prophet won’t follow his own counsel.

It is not hard to understand why he would encourage members to testify of these things. The Book of Mormon is “[the keystone of our religion](#)” and Joseph Smith is its founder, so they’re of course among the most important things to testify of. The fact that Monson is apparently aware of this importance makes his failure to testify of them all the more curious. Moreover, there are far more people – among believers, investigators, and critics – who question the church’s founding than there are people who question God and Jesus.

Thus testimonies of the former are the most needed, which compels us to ask even more earnestly: why then is he only testifying of the latter?

As the oft-quoted LDS scripture teaches, “Of him unto whom much is given much is required” (D&C 82:3). If ordinary members are expected to testify of the Restoration, then those unto whom God has given prophetic authority should be expected to do so with even greater conviction and clarity. Arguably, few Latter-day Saints would say that they don’t expect as much, and many, if not all, past church presidents periodically met this expectation during their tenures. For example, here are excerpts from the closing testimony of one of Spencer W. Kimball’s Conference talks:

Knowing full well that before long, in the natural course of events, I must stand before the Lord and give an accounting of my words, I now add my personal and solemn testimony that God, the Eternal Father, and the risen Lord, Jesus Christ, appeared to the boy Joseph Smith. I testify that the Book of Mormon is a translation of an ancient record of nations who once lived in this western hemisphere...

I testify that the holy priesthood, both Aaronic and Melchizedek, with authority to act in the name of God, was restored to the earth by John the Baptist, and Peter, James, and John; that other keys and authority were subsequently restored; and that the power and authority of those various divine bestowals are among us today. Of these things I bear solemn witness to all within the sound of my voice. (“[Remarks and Dedication of the Fayette, New York, Buildings](#)”, Apr. 1980)

In contrast to this heartfelt declaration of belief in the founding events of Mormonism, Monson appears to be deliberately sidestepping every opportunity to vocally testify of these events and is instead limiting his testimonies to concepts accepted by every church in Christendom. This should open our minds to the possibility that, in comparison to his belief in basic Christian doctrines, his belief in uniquely LDS doctrines is lacking. Near the end of this essay, more detailed theories on where Monson stands in his beliefs will be presented and argued for.

Faithful church members may be tempted to gloss over this issue, assuming that there must be some innocuous explanation for Monson’s behavior. The problem, however, is that there appear to be only a few such alternative explanations and they each have serious problems of their own that render them unlikely. In a later section, I will discuss each of them and evaluate their plausibility.

If you would like to skip, for the time being, the sections of this paper that support and defend the position being advocated in great depth, [click here](#). Otherwise, read on.

Supporting Observations

The following evidences and arguments support the notions that Monson's unwillingness to testify of unique core beliefs is intentional and/or that his testimony of them is deficient.

Observation #1: In his statements that come closest to testimonies of distinctive doctrines, Monson's language is much softer and more equivocal than it is in his testimonies of basic Christian doctrines. According to Pamela Meyer, the author of the book *Liespotting: Proven Techniques to Detect Deception*, those who don't believe what they say will often "shy away from dwelling on their deception" by "[opting for softer language](#)" such as euphemisms, which are "[mild, indirect, or vague term\[s\]](#)" or [expressions](#) substituted for ones that are more blunt, direct, and vivid.

Throughout the remainder of this essay, you will see Monson's strongest statements on distinctive church doctrines along with demonstrations of how weak and ambiguous they are. When you see these statements, contrast them with the following bold and unequivocal testimonies from him of the reality, divinity, and love of God and Jesus:

With all my heart and the fervency of my soul, I lift up my voice in testimony as a special witness and declare that God does live. Jesus is His Son, the Only Begotten of the Father in the flesh. He is our Redeemer; He is our Mediator with the Father. He it was who died on the cross to atone for our sins. He became the firstfruits of the Resurrection. Because He died, all shall live again. "Oh, sweet the joy this sentence gives: '**I know** that my Redeemer lives!'" ("I Know That My Redeemer Lives", Apr. 2007. See also "Looking Back and Moving Forward", Apr. 2008)

With all the strength of my soul I testify that our Heavenly Father loves each one of us... His Son, our Savior and Redeemer, speaks to each of us... ("Mrs. Patton—the Story Continues", Oct. 2007)

I know without question, my brothers and sisters, that God lives. ("Looking Back and Moving Forward", Apr. 2008)

I bear my testimony to you... that our Savior lives... **I leave with you my witness and my testimony** that God our Eternal Father lives and loves us. He is indeed our Father, and He is personal and real. ("Closing Remarks", Oct. 2009. See also "Until We Meet Again", Oct. 2011)

Our thoughts will turn to the Savior's life, His death, and His Resurrection. **As His special witness, I testify to you** that He lives and that He awaits our triumphant return. ("The Race of Life", Apr. 2012)

Of Him who spoke these words, **I declare my personal witness:** He is the Son of God, our Redeemer, and our Savior. (“See Others as They May Become”, Oct. 2012. See also “Come, All Ye Sons of God”, Apr. 2013)

I bear my personal witness and testimony to you that God lives, that He hears the prayers of humble hearts. His Son, our Savior and Redeemer, speaks to each of us... (“Until We Meet Again”, Apr. 2013)

With all the strength of my soul, I testify that God lives and loves us, that His Only Begotten Son lived and died for us, and that the gospel of Jesus Christ is that penetrating light which shines through the darkness of our lives (“I Will Not Fail Thee, nor Forsake Thee”, Oct. 2013).

Some will contend that I am just splitting hairs and playing with semantics when I show that certain statements of Monson’s regarding unique doctrines are not testimonies. While I understand this viewpoint, I don’t accept it and I think the reasoning I document in each case is sufficient to support my stance. Even if I did concede the charge, however, my methodology would still be valid because it identifies a consistently wide gulf existing between these statements and Monson’s testimonies of basic Christian principles. Notice that there is absolutely no question that the above quotes are all testimonies of God and Jesus. If we truly are just splitting hairs, why is it that we can’t split hairs with any of these testimonies no matter how hard we try but can very easily with every one of his almost-testimonies of Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, the Restoration, and modern prophets? Why will he boldly and unequivocally testify of the former but not the latter? Could it be that he believes in the former more strongly than he does the latter? (Alternative explanations will be presented and rebutted later)

Another reason why this approach is valid is because the church and its top leaders have shown repeatedly over time that they are extremely careful with their wording. For example, in the new edition of the scriptures that they released in March of this year, the part of the Introduction to the Pearl of Great Price [that describes the Book of Abraham was changed](#) from “A translation from some Egyptian papyri” to “An inspired translation... [that] Joseph Smith began... after obtaining some Egyptian papyri.” This change will be invisible to most church members because it appears on the surface to be nothing more than a simple rewording that leaves the underlying message untouched. What it does, however, is make room for apologetic arguments that defend the validity of the Book of Abraham. Since Egyptologists – both LDS and non-LDS – have shown that the book [does not match or even resemble the Egyptian](#) writings on the scroll that Joseph Smith said he translated it from, LDS apologists have proposed a number of theories to deal with this problem. One of these theories – the “[revealed text](#)” or “catalyst” theory – says that the scroll did **not** contain Abraham’s writings but rather served **only** to [catalyze Joseph’s receipt of revelations](#) containing the translation of Abraham’s lost writings. The old introduction ([along with all headings](#) that the book has had since it was written in 1835) did not allow for this possibility; rather it required one to believe that the scroll was written by Abraham and that the Book of Abraham was translated directly from it. The new introduction, however, not only allows for the new theory, it seems to hint that the church

plans to officially embrace it. Thus we see that a small difference in wording from the church and its leaders can reveal a considerable difference in intended meaning. For more examples of this effect, see the [other changes reflected in the new edition](#) of the scriptures and the [myriad changes made to the *Gospel Principles* manual](#) in 2009.

Monson's behavior when speaking of unique church doctrines resembles what people often do when they feel obligated to say something they don't fully believe but still want to be able to convince themselves that they're not technically lying about anything. For example, a mother asks her teenage son whether he knows who took his younger sister's cupcake and he answers, "Well I've been gone all day so I sure didn't eat it." The truth is that he took it before he left in the morning and gave it to a friend at school, but with his reply, he conveys the message that he doesn't know who took it without technically saying anything false. It would only be by splitting hairs with his words and asking more direct follow-up questions that his mother could find out what he really knows about the situation. If the mother gave him additional opportunities to tell everything he knew and he continued to give ambiguous or circuitous responses, she could be reasonably confident that he was deliberately holding something back. Similarly, in this essay, we will look at what Monson has done with the dozens of opportunities he has been given over the last eight years to tell us what he knows, and we will find that he too has consistently responded with ambiguity or even silence – but only in regards to the founding doctrines of Mormonism – which will compel us to ask whether he is deliberately holding back from testifying of them.

Observation #2: On many occasions, he has testified of things that could be affirmed by people of various faiths – Christian and otherwise – and that are less important to testify of than unique fundamental LDS beliefs according to the statements in the above section ("Why It Matters"). Several examples follow:

You "are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation," and you can make a difference. To these truths **I testify**... ("Examples of Righteousness", Apr. 2008)

I know that the sweetest experience in all this life is to feel His promptings as He directs us in the furtherance of His work... **I testify** that each one of us can feel the Lord's inspiration as we live worthily and strive to serve Him. ("Looking Back and Moving Forward", Apr. 2008)

The strength which we earnestly seek in order to meet the challenges of a complex and changing world can be ours when, with fortitude and resolute courage, we stand and declare with Joshua, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." To this divine truth **I testify**... ("Be Your Best Self", Apr. 2009)

I testify to you that our promised blessings are beyond measure. ("Be of Good Cheer", Apr. 2009)

During this conference we sustained a new member of that Quorum. He is completely dedicated to the work of the Lord, and **I testify** that he is the man our Heavenly Father wants to fill this position at this time. (“Until We Meet Again”, Apr. 2009)

If we desire to have a proper spirit with us at all times, we must choose to refrain from becoming angry. **I testify** that such is possible. (“School Thy Feelings, O My Brother”, Oct. 2009)

To all within the sound of my voice, I declare, if a man die, he shall live again. **We know**, for we have the light of revealed truth. (“He is Risen”, Apr. 2010)

I declare that the welfare program of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is inspired of Almighty God. (“The Holy Temple—a Beacon to the World”, Apr. 2011)

I testify to you that we are all in this together and that every man, woman, and child has a part to play. (“Closing Remarks”, Oct. 2009. See also “Until We Meet Again”, Oct. 2011)

Believe that remaining strong and faithful to the truths of the gospel is of utmost importance. **I testify** that it is! (“Believe, Obey, Endure”, Apr. 2012)

I know without question that the Lord intended for those who were present at that session of the Frankfurt Temple dedication to hear the powerful, touching testimony of His servant Brother Peter Mourik. (“Stand in Holy Places”, Oct. 2011)

I too love Relief Society. **I testify to you** that it was organized by inspiration and is a vital part of the Lord’s Church here upon the earth. (“We Never Walk Alone”, Oct. 2013)

(It is true that a few of these testimonies refer to specific leaders and programs of the church but similar statements could easily be made by members of other churches in regards to their own leaders and programs)

To the best of my knowledge, no statement from any church leader or lesson manual has ever called for any of these concepts to be included in Mormon testimonies. Furthermore, the concepts are fairly uninteresting and uncontroversial in comparison to core distinctive doctrines, and it can’t be said that losing belief in any of them is among the leading causes of apostasy among church members. In contrast, people leave the church after losing faith in Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and other proprietary claims quite frequently. In light of all this, aren’t these the beliefs that really need to be reinforced through testimony bearing?

Why does Monson seem eager to testify of nearly everything he believes in except for the very ideas that need to be testified of the most? This is quite mysterious if we assume that these ideas are fully included in his beliefs. If we consider the contrary, however, it becomes much easier to explain.

Observation #3: Of talks given in the church, it is almost universally true that the most sincere testimonies are reserved for the ending remarks. Throughout the bulk of a talk, information is shared, stories are told, and arguments are made, but in the conclusion, speakers are expected to express their personal conviction of what they know, and Monson appears to follow this custom. With one exception, all of his most sincere testimonies (such as those quoted in “Observation #1”; the exception is the third one down) have appeared in the last four paragraphs of his talks. This suggests that we should be able to gain some insight into how strong his conviction is of each of the concepts that Latter-day Saints are expected to testify of by how often he refers to them in these concluding paragraphs.

It would be difficult to count the references he makes to basic Christian principles in these paragraphs for they surely number in the hundreds. In contrast, here is what we find of the unique basics of Mormonism:

- One reference to Joseph Smith in the fourth paragraph from the end of one talk (“Until We Meet Again”, Apr. 2013) and one in the sixth paragraph from the end of another (“As We Gather Once Again”, Apr. 2012)
- One reference to the Book of Mormon in the seventh paragraph from the end of one talk (“Closing Remarks”, Apr. 2012)

It is interesting that there were a total of 51 mentions of these things in Monson’s 61 talks but only one of them made it into the last four paragraphs of a talk, and even that one appeared before any testimony was borne. The odds of this happening by chance are about 1 in 103 (1.0%)*, making it reasonable to suspect that his omission of these topics from the most personal parts of his talks is purposeful. Now this might not be the only explanation that could be offered, but I do not know of any others that are sensible.

* Odds were calculated by running simulations in Excel that use the RANDBETWEEN function to generate random numbers. Also incorporated was the fact that there are a total of 1857 paragraphs in Monson’s talks, 244 of which comprise their last four paragraphs, and 47 of which contain one or more references to Joseph Smith or the Book of Mormon.

Observation #4: The term “Prophet Joseph” appears 17 times in Monson’s talks. In 16 of them, the word “Prophet” is capitalized, directly preceded by the word “the”, and seemingly used as a mere title (in fact, the [Collins English Dictionary](#) defines “the Prophet” as “**a name for Joseph Smith** as founder of the Mormon Church”, so technically, anyone could use it). In one of them, however, the word is not capitalized or directly preceded by the word “the” and is used in a way that appears to imply that he really was a prophet:

Besides her children and these meager possessions, she took with her a strong faith in God and in the gospel as revealed to the latter-day prophet Joseph Smith. (“Be of Good Cheer”, Apr. 2009)

As it turns out, there is another way in which this instance of the term stands out from the others: it was arguably said from the perspective of another person – a person who truly believed that Joseph was a prophet. This raises the question of why Monson is using the term merely as a title when saying it from his own perspective but as a meaningful accreditation when saying it from another’s. What could this indicate other than a gap between his beliefs regarding Joseph Smith and those of the faithful woman he spoke of? Of course, this *could* just be coincidence, but the odds of it occurring by chance are somewhere between 1 in 17 and 1 in 131,000*, depending on the assumptions made.

* Calculated by raising 2 to the 17th power since there are 2 ways to use the word “prophet” in this context and 17 talks in which it is so used.

Observation #5: In one talk, Monson went in to detail about how anyone can gain a testimony of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling, his First Vision, the restoration of the gospel, and the restoration of the priesthood. He then immediately declared the following:

“Once we have a testimony, it is incumbent upon us to share that testimony with others.” (“Dare to Stand Alone”, Oct. 2011)

This is similar to the statement we saw earlier from Oaks that “those who have a testimony of the restored gospel also have a duty to share it.” Monson’s willingness to say this while persistently failing to testify of these principles himself, is revealing of either 1) hypocrisy or 2) a lack of testimony of the principles, which would free him from having it “incumbent upon [him] to share” any testimony of them. You can decide which you think is more likely. Perhaps they could both apply to some extent.

Observation #6: As mentioned earlier, he has not always shirked his duty to testify of his church’s founding. Seeing the most recent vocal testimonies of his that include this founding will allow us to note how abruptly and drastically his testimonies changed soon thereafter (although even these don’t include the Book of Mormon). They are from the October 2005 Conference and the two Conferences prior to it:

- “To this fitting tribute to our beloved Joseph, I add my own testimony that I know he was God’s prophet, chosen to restore the gospel of Jesus Christ in these latter days.” (“[The Prophet Joseph Smith: Teacher by Example](#)”, Oct. 2005)
- “May each of us emulate the Prophet Joseph’s great example. He taught the truth; he lived the truth; he shared the truth.” (“[Be Thou an Example](#)”, Apr. 2005) Note: This is arguably not a testimony, but it included three statements of apparent belief in the talk’s closing paragraphs (third to last).

- “I bear to you, my beloved sisters, my witness that Heavenly Father lives, that Jesus is the Christ, and that we are led today by a prophet for our time—even President Gordon B. Hinckley.” (“[If Ye Are Prepared Ye Shall Not Fear](#)”, Oct. 2004)

So Monson went from bearing his testimony of important unique claims in three consecutive (or two out of three) Conferences to suddenly not bearing it over the next 15 consecutive Conferences. What happened to cause this enormous change? One can only speculate, but as we will soon see, it’s hard to propose a reasonable answer that doesn’t postulate at least some loss of belief in the historicity of the events of the Restoration.

Observation #7: On four occasions over a period of three years (from October 2008 to October 2011), Monson included the following sentence word for word in the closing testimony of his “farewell” talk at the end of the Conference:

I bear my testimony (or “bear witness”) to you that this work is true, that our Savior lives, and that He guides and directs His Church here upon the earth.

This persistent mechanical recycling of the sentence combined with the fact that it was always used in the same type of talk causes it to resemble a memorized line that one would recite periodically out of necessity more than a heartfelt declaration made with sincerity.

What’s particularly interesting about this statement is that 1) it is arguably the closest Monson ever came to testifying of the church’s exclusive doctrines, as you will see in the next section, and 2) he repeated it verbatim far more times (four) than any other statement of testimony. There were four others that he used twice (to find them, search the PDF document for the phrases “personal and real”, “fervency of my soul”, “all in this together”, and “speaks to each of us”) and the rest were unique as far as I can tell. The fact that he is giving testimonies that come closest to containing uniquely LDS claims in a significantly more mechanical fashion (and in much fewer number) than he is giving testimonies that only contain common Christian doctrines suggests that he is reluctant to give the former and is less sincere in giving them. This is consistent with the fact that he seems even more reluctant – to the point of refusal – to give testimonies that unambiguously do contain uniquely LDS claims. This indication of reluctance and lack of sincerity supports the hypothesis that Monson has lost at least some of his belief in the veracity of these claims.

Observation #8: In no fewer than nine talks, Monson expressed gratitude for the Restoration of the gospel but then neglected to actually testify of it (To find these instances, search the PDF document for the partial word “restor”. See also his talk “Our Sacred Priesthood Trust” from April 2006 in which he spoke at length about the details of the Restoration but then offered no personal witness of them). By LDS standards, these were glaring missed opportunities, and for someone – especially a prophet – to watch that many of them pass by is rather peculiar. The following example is particularly interesting:

I want you to know how grateful I am for the gospel of Jesus Christ, restored in these latter days through the Prophet Joseph Smith. It is the key to our happiness... I bear my personal witness and testimony to you that God lives,

that He hears the prayers of humble hearts. His Son, our Savior and Redeemer, speaks to each of us... (“Until We Meet Again”, Apr. 2013)

While the first sentence of this quote may look like a testimony at first glance, notice that its purpose is actually to express gratitude for the gospel, not to declare personal knowledge that it really was restored by God through Joseph Smith in actual history. Clearly, the beginning of the last sentence marked the beginning of the testimony.

So Monson will speak favorably of the Restoration and Joseph Smith and even give him the title of “Prophet” but when it comes time to “bear [his] personal witness and testimony” a sentence or two later, only God and Jesus are mentioned. It’s hard to imagine even an ordinary church member talking about their founder and founding like that and then immediately leaving them out of their testimony. From an LDS perspective, this is puzzling behavior, but even so, if it were a one-time occurrence, it could be overlooked. For Monson, however, it’s apparently the rule, and this is another sign that his failure to testify could be willful.

Observation #9: Studies have shown that when speaking misleadingly, people tend to make fewer self-references, meaning they use fewer first-person pronouns. According to deception experts, this is a form of “distancing language”, which is subconsciously used in order to distance oneself from their lies or, by extension, from things they talk about that they don’t entirely believe in.

Is Monson guilty of using such language? Perhaps. In sentences where he mentions his “Redeemer” or “Father in Heaven”, he is 5.3 times more likely to also refer to himself than he is in sentences where he mentions Joseph Smith or the Book of Mormon. Out of 36 sentences containing the terms “Redeemer” or “Father in Heaven”, 15 of them include self-references (41.7%) while out of 51 sentences containing the terms “Joseph Smith” or “Book of Mormon”, only 4 include them (7.8%). Might he be subconsciously distancing himself from the latter concepts?

This difference is statistically highly significant – the odds of it occurring purely by chance are somewhere between 1 in 13,600 and 1 in 5,310,000* (depending on the assumptions made). Therefore, some explanation(s) is/are needed to account for the disparity and there could possibly be others beyond the one I’ve proposed.

Now you might wonder why I didn’t look at more common terms such as “God”, “Jesus”, “Christ”, “Savior”, or “Heavenly Father”. The reason is because there are nearly 1,000 occurrences of such terms (over 100 of each) and analyzing all the sentences in which they appear would have been impractical.

* Odds were calculated with combinatorial and probabilistic formulas and confirmed by running simulations in Excel that make use of the RANDBETWEEN function.

Potential Objections

Let us now look at five potential objections to the notion that Monson is not testifying of Mormonism's unique central claims – the only five that I have found to be worth addressing – and evaluate their validity. These objections contain the statements from his Conference talks that arguably come closest to constituting testimonies of such claims as well as one brief testimony from an Ensign article.

*“He testified that the church is led by modern prophets when he said, ‘I testify as well that our Savior Jesus Christ is at the head of this Church, which bears His name.’
('Looking Back and Moving Forward', Apr. 2008)”*

Christians of other denominations also claim that Jesus is at the head of their church since the New Testament says as much [in multiple places](#): “Christ is the head of the church” (Ephesians 5:23; see also 1:22, 4:15, Colossians 1:18). So it cannot be said that such a statement affirms any distinctively Mormon belief. Furthermore, there is a substantial difference between this statement and an assertion that Jesus leads the church himself through revelations to its leaders on par with those that the apostles of the original Christian church recorded.

“He testified of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon when he said, speaking of the BOM, ‘If it is true—and it is—then Joseph Smith was a prophet...’ ('Priesthood Power', Apr. 2011)”

It is doubtful that many church members would consider these words to be a testimony by anyone, much less by a prophet. If there are any who would classify it as one, they would probably admit that it's a very weak one that doesn't live up to the church's definition – “a solemn declaration of truth based on personal knowledge or belief” (cited earlier) – or up to the earnestness of testimonies borne by ordinary members every week in every LDS congregation. This is especially true since the words were spoken in passing near the beginning of the talk rather than at the end where testimonies are usually borne (recall that none of Monson's bold testimonies are found prior to the last four paragraphs).

The purpose of this statement appears to be to establish a logical connection between the idea that the Book of Mormon is true and the idea that Joseph Smith was a prophet and to use that connection to imply that he was a prophet. Merely implying something and actually testifying of it are two very different things, however. It's true that there is a brief (seven-letter) interjection of seeming belief into the middle of the statement – “and it is” – but this is clearly not the statement's primary purpose and is certainly not a solemn expression of personal conviction.

“He testified of modern prophets when he said, ‘I am keenly aware of the 15 men who preceded me as President of the Church... I have the sure knowledge, as I am confident they had, that God directs His prophet.’ ('Looking Back and Moving Forward', Apr. 2008)”

This is not a testimony that the church is led by true prophets, seers, and revelators but rather a testimony that God directs the president of the church. The testimony is of the directing (which says nothing extraordinary, as shown below) and not of the prophetic mantle that the president carries, even though this mantle is briefly alluded to.

The statement is also weakened by its context and ambiguity, which produce an array of alternative ways to interpret it. For example, Monson had just finished saying (in the sentence immediately preceding the quote) that every righteous person can be guided by God as well: "I testify that each one of us can feel the Lord's inspiration as we live worthily and strive to serve Him." Thus the prophet's inspiration is being lumped together with the inspiration that we can all receive and there is nothing in it to imply that his is any different or better than ours (more on this later). Because of this, he could easily be saying that God directs the men who lead the church in their own lives the same way he directs ordinary righteous people in theirs. If he had said something like God "speaks to" or "reveals the mysteries of his kingdom to" his prophet, the meaning would be clearer, but instead he chose one of the weakest and most ambiguous word possible – "directs". For all we know, this could mean that God directs him through nothing more than divine providence. And like the previous statement, this one was made near the beginning of the talk, making its status as an LDS testimony even more dubious.

In addition, it's not clear what he means by "prophet" since he allows the word to stand alone without giving any adjectives or verbs to give it context and elucidate it. Is he defining it as a spokesman for God like the men who wrote the Bible or simply as a title that the church's president takes on by default? Perhaps he's defining it as "an effective or leading spokesman for a cause, doctrine, or group" ([Merriam-Webster Dictionary](#)) or as an "advocate", the meaning of the Greek word [it derives from](#) ([profétés](#)).

Finally, he is not even directly saying that he or any of these "15 men" were prophets or that their "sure knowledge" came through personal experience. He could have merely meant that "God directs His prophet" whenever there is one on the earth and that he knows this from his study of the Bible. This is especially plausible in light of the fact that he had been the church's president for only two months when he spoke these words. In order to discount any of these possibilities, we would need language that is less equivocal and more descriptive – like the language usually found in LDS testimonies.

"When he testifies 'that this work is true, that our Savior lives, and that he guides and directs His Church here upon the earth', which he has done multiple times, he bears his testimony that Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon are true and divine since the former statement implies the latter."

This is another example of a statement that could be made by ministers of other denominations, so we cannot consider it to contain any exclusively LDS assertion. Even if it is true that LDS claims are implied, implying something and testifying of it are two very different actions, as we noted earlier.

And in reality, the former statement does not imply the latter. It can be interpreted to mean the latter, but it's actually ambiguous due to how brief and non-descriptive it is, and thus it allows for several alternative interpretations. For example, Monson could be defining "His Church" the way most Christians do – as the worldwide body of all Christian believers of all denominations. Similarly, he could mean for "this work" to refer to the work of Christianity in general. He could also believe that the Savior "directs His Church" through divine providence or by guiding its members through the Spirit but not through any uniquely direct revelation to the LDS prophet or apostles. Even the word "true" is ambiguous in this context and could simply mean that this work is steadfast or loyal ([Merriam-Webster Dictionary](#)) to the Lord as one who is "true to the faith".

As discussed earlier (in "Observation #7"), this statement of Monson's appears in four of his talks as part of a sentence that is identical – practically word for word – in each case. This mechanical recycling of the sentence resembles a rote recitation more than it does a heartfelt declaration.

"He testified of the Book of Mormon when he wrote, 'I testify of the truthfulness of this 'most correct of any book on earth,' even the Book of Mormon...' ('Precious Promises of the Book of Mormon', Ensign, Oct. 2011)"

The main problem here is that Monson never actually spoke these words as far as we know; they only appear in print in one of his Ensign articles. Even if we assume that he wrote this sentence himself, it would only amplify the strangeness of his behavior because it would support the position that he is not simply forgetting to bear testimony in Conference but rather has consciously decided against it. Why would he write it but refuse to speak it? This is a mystery if we assume that he has a strong testimony of the Book of Mormon. If his testimony is wanting, however, a willingness to write it but not speak it is easier to understand.

Now as strange as it may sound to some members, we can't discount the possibility that this brief testimony was not written by Monson himself. As it turns out, ghostwriting is quite common among public figures and is found even [among some religious ones](#); in fact, William W. Phelps served as a [ghostwriter for Joseph Smith](#) for at least a year and produced a number of important works for him. And [Ezra Taft Benson's grandson has revealed](#) that what was arguably his most famous Conference talk, "Beware of Pride", was in fact written by his daughter-in-law (since he was apparently too ill to write it himself), who largely lifted it from a six-page passage of C.S. Lewis's book *Mere Christianity*. Even a couple of Hinckley's books – *Standing for Something* and *Stand a Little Taller* – were written by other people after consulting with him, according to a reliable source I'm acquainted with who was told this by Hinckley's own secretary.

I could go on but I think the point is clear – there's really no way to know whether Monson wrote the entire article himself. Even if he did write the bulk of it, this out-of-character testimony could have been added by an editor or an assistant. If your response to this suggestion is that no one holding a position like that would do such a thing, you should know that the practice of [intentionally adding and changing](#) large sections of important text

was not uncommon among even the faithful scribes who were responsible for copying early New Testament manuscripts.

In the interest of completeness, I'll say that I have not read all of Monson's Ensign articles from the last eight years and thus can't say whether others among them contain similar testimonies. If there are others, the same response will apply to them. This essay is primarily concerned with his General Conference talks since these are his opportunities to vocally testify to the world.

Note: Now that you have read the spoken statements of Monson's that come closest to a testimony of the Restoration and have seen how vague they are, compare them to Spencer W. Kimball's testimony quoted earlier and to the following from Gordon B. Hinckley:

We declare without equivocation that God the Father and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, appeared in person to the boy Joseph Smith. ("[The Marvelous Foundation of Our Faith](#)", Oct. 2002)

Now this isn't quite a testimony either but it reveals how members are expected to testify of Joseph Smith and the Restoration. Until Monson boldly "declare[s] without equivocation" that he has sure knowledge of one or more of the church's unique foundational claims like he did prior to eight years ago, the fact will remain that he has not borne testimony of them since then. And even if he does bear it again at some point, the question of why he went so many years without doing so will persist unless he explains to us his reasons for refraining.

Alternative Explanations

Is this refusal to testify really the result of Monson's belief not being what it once was or could there be some other force at work? There are four alternative explanations that I have found to be worth addressing, so let's take a look at each of them and evaluate their plausibility.

"Maybe Monson just doesn't bear his testimony in general as much as other prophets and apostles have. Some church members with powerful testimonies just don't bear them in public for some reason. Maybe Monson is like this."

He actually seems to have no problem with bearing his testimony in General Conference because he does it frequently, often with bold, enthusiastic language, as we saw earlier (see the passages quoted in Observations #1, #2, #5, and #6 in the section "Supporting Observations"). You would think that out of all the times he has borne witness of what he knows, there would have been at least one time when he would have included words like "that the Book of Mormon is a true record of scripture", "that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God", or "that God speaks to prophets in our day and age" since such is common practice among church members and leaders and is strongly encouraged (even by Monson himself, as we've seen). Yet he hasn't done this.

Also worthy of mention is the fact that the word “testify” and its various forms (including “testimony”) appear 173 times throughout his talks over the last eight years, so he evidently takes no issue with the concept of testifying in general and is continuously conscious of it.

“Perhaps he’s trying to mainstream the church and/or get us away from what critics call ‘Joseph Smith worship’ by talking less about Joseph and church origins and more about Jesus and the most fundamental gospel principles.”

While the church does appear to be trying to mainstream, this does not explain Monson’s behavior because it doesn’t account for the fact that many of his and other top leaders’ recent Conference talks, along with other current correlated church materials, encourage members both implicitly and explicitly to develop and bear testimonies of Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the Restoration and even tell them how to do it (see “Why It Matters” and “Observation #5” above).

Additionally, if this explanation were valid, it’s doubtful that he would ever come so close to bearing his testimony of Joseph Smith that many people who aren’t carefully listening to every word are likely to think he actually did bear it. For examples, refer to the objections in the above section (“Potential Objections”) and at “Observation #8” in the section above that. Here’s another example:

I believe the testimony of one who, in this dispensation, spoke with the Father and the Son in a grove now called sacred and who gave his life, sealing that testimony with his blood. Declared he: “And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives!” (“He Is Risen”, Apr. 2010)

A listener could easily be left thinking that Monson had just said he believes Joseph’s testimony that he spoke with God and Jesus in the sacred grove when what he was really approving was Joseph’s testimony of Jesus. Yet another example:

When we know the Book of Mormon is true, then it follows that Joseph Smith was indeed a prophet and that he saw God the Eternal Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. It also follows that the gospel was restored in these latter days through Joseph Smith... (“Dare to Stand Alone”, Oct. 2011)

This might sound like a testimony and it almost is one, but upon reading it carefully, you can see that it merely establishes a logical connection between concepts – the truth of the Book of Mormon and the divinity of Joseph Smith’s calling and work – without actually affirming either. An almost-testimony of Joseph doesn’t sound much less like “Joseph Smith worship” than does an actual testimony of him, so it makes little sense to say that Monson is trying to get the church away from this kind of talk.

Finally, if it were true that he was trying to do this, it’s doubtful that he would attach the title of Prophet to Joseph as frequently as he does. Over the time period in question,

Monson has mentioned Joseph in 18 of his talks, and in all but one of them he used the word “Prophet” in connection with his name (by saying “the Prophet Joseph Smith”, “Joseph Smith the Prophet”, etc.). Monson’s willingness to repeatedly talk about Joseph and give him the title of Prophet without ever taking an extra second to add simple words like “I know he was a prophet” is much more indicative of something personal happening within Monson than it is of the church’s mainstreaming efforts.

“He is probably just more emotional about basic Christian principles than he is about the unique basics of Mormonism and only testifies of the things he is most emotional about.”

As shown extensively in “Observation #2”, he has actually testified of some relatively mundane things on many occasions that we would not expect him (or any other Latter-day Saint) to be especially emotional about – at least not more emotional than we would expect him to be about the founding of his church. Therefore, emotion does not appear to be the primary driving factor behind his testimonies (although it does seem to influence the enthusiasm with which he expresses them). This leaves belief as the probable driver behind them.

Even if we accepted the explanation being offered, this would not excuse Monson from his solemn duty to testify of the doctrines of the Restoration, which is articulated in various statements quoted earlier (in “Why It Matters” and “Observation #5”), two of which he made himself. It also wouldn’t account for the fact that he often expresses gratitude for the Restoration and Joseph Smith and occasionally comes close to testifying of them (as shown in the response to previous explanation) nor would it account for the fact that he used to bear testimony of these notions regularly (see “Observation #6”). Did he suddenly become less emotional about them eight years ago? If so, what could have caused such a change that wouldn’t have also triggered some weakening of his conviction of them?

“Maybe there are certain legal issues or other external pressures we don’t know about that have required him to avoid bearing testimony of the church’s unique fundamentals in General Conference.”

If such pressures existed, we would expect them to require all other members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles to make the same avoidance, but this is not what we see. Some of them frequently bear testimony of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. For example, Henry B. Eyring, the First Counselor in the First Presidency (Monson’s right-hand man), recently testified of both in a single Conference:

I testify that God... and His resurrected and glorified Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to an inexperienced boy, Joseph Smith. ([“Preparation in the Priesthood: I Need Your Help”](#), Oct. 2011)

I leave you my sure witness that God lives and will answer your prayers. Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. The Book of Mormon is a true and sure witness that He lives... ([“A Witness”](#), Oct. 2011)

We would also expect such issues to have compelled Gordon B. Hinckley to make the same avoidance when he was president, especially in his last Conferences immediately preceding the time when Monson took the reins. But this does not appear to have been the case. For example, during Hinckley's last Conference, he testified as follows:

To you, this day, I affirm my witness of the calling of the Prophet Joseph, of his works, of the sealing of his testimony with his blood as a martyr to the eternal truth. ("[The Stone Cut Out of the Mountain](#)", Oct. 2007)

While this statement is relatively non-descriptive and arguably has more words than substance, it does express personal conviction regarding Joseph and his work.

Remember that Monson stopped testifying of the Restoration and related concepts a full two years before he took Hinckley's place. Since Monson has gone extended periods of time like this while those above him were testifying and later while those below him were (and are) doing so, it doesn't seem like any external factor can be blamed for the behavior.

Even if we ignore these facts, the proposition is still incredibly unlikely. Since everything the Church does and teaches incorporates claims about the divinity of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, it seems impossible that a personal testimony of such things from Monson could create legal issues more than these materials would. In addition, nearly every religion on the planet makes similarly unprovable, supernatural claims that their leaders testify of, so why would LDS leaders be any less free to do likewise, especially in a country that generally protects the freedoms of speech and religion?

Note: At this point, we have seen that it is extremely difficult – and perhaps impossible – to identify a reasonable faith-promoting explanation for why Thomas Monson has consistently failed to bear testimony to the world of his church's unique foundational claims for the last eight years. I think nearly all believing Mormons would join me in saying that if a prophet of God has a testimony of the Restoration, he will boldly bear it when given the opportunity. Since Monson has not been bearing it despite receiving dozens of opportunities to do so, it is reasonable to seriously question whether he has one.

Possible Implications

Recall that in the section "Supporting Observations", several reasons to suspect that Monson's refusal to testify is intentional were presented. Recall also the testimony that Spencer W. Kimball began as follows:

Knowing full well that before long, in the natural course of events, I must stand before the Lord and give an accounting of my words, I now add my personal and solemn testimony...

Kimball testified of what he believed apparently because he expected that he would soon be held accountable for his words. Is it possible that this very same expectation is motivating Monson's behavior? Is he refraining from testifying of things he lacks belief in out of fear that he will soon have to answer for his honesty or lack thereof? [The scriptures do say](#) that dishonesty will keep a person out of heaven (Psalms 101:7, Revelation 21:8, 22:14-15, 2 Nephi 9:34), so is he giving himself plausible deniability in case he needs it on Judgment Day? Given our failure to find sensible alternative explanations, this possibility should be taken seriously.

If it's true that his testimony of the Restoration is deficient, then what exactly does he believe with regards to it? I will now offer two theories on how this question should be answered and then offer an idea on what may have led Monson to this point. The first theory is the simplest – that he is unsure of whether Joseph Smith was the prophet he claimed to be and of whether the Restoration actually happened.

The second theory is that his views on the church's founding are highly nuanced. For example, he might think Joseph Smith was worthy of the title "Prophet" because he was a great leader, teacher, and "spokesman for a movement" ([Collins English Dictionary](#)) or "a person **regarded as, or claiming to be**, an inspired teacher or leader" ([Random House Dictionary](#)) who "restored" the gospel by putting his intelligence and study of the bible and other literature to use to figure out the truth behind Jesus' gospel and church organization. He would have then created the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price, and his stories of encounters with heavenly beings (possibly with help from Sidney Rigdon, Oliver Cowdery, and/or source materials) as tools for teaching that gospel and gaining converts to it. In this view, God approved of much of what he did and perhaps even helped him to an extent in doing some of it.

Additionally, Monson seems to believe that the church is a force for good in the world and that its scriptures and history contain valuable stories that teach important principles even if he questions the historical merit of some of them. He certainly wouldn't be the first to think this way; there are many others in the church who take a similar approach (including a stake presidency counselor I had on my mission). In fact, the prominent LDS scholar [Terryl Givens](#) was recently asked about such people, and [he responded in part](#) that one doesn't have to "believe that the Book of Mormon is literally the word of God" in order to get a temple recommend.

Monson also appears to believe that people will live safer, happier lives for being a part of the church even if he doubts whether it's everything it claims to be. He probably wants people to have a stronger testimony of its founding story than he does because he knows that most people will not remain a part of it and benefit from it unless they fully subscribe to this story. On several occasions, he has opined that maintaining a strong testimony is critical for both practical and spiritual reasons. For example:

If we do not have a deep foundation of faith and a solid testimony of truth, we may have difficulty withstanding the harsh storms and icy winds of adversity which inevitably come to each of us. ("How Firm a Foundation", Oct. 2006)

This view that faith and testimony are of the utmost importance in a person's life could explain why he speaks in glowing terms about the founding figures, events, and scriptures of Mormonism as one who fully believes in them even if his belief in their literal factuality is limited. He may see the promotion of faith in LDS teachings as a worthy and important endeavor regardless of whether the teachings are all true. Perhaps he subscribes in part to the [centuries-old adage](#) "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise."

These theories on Monson's views could explain what he says (including how he says it) as well as what he does not say about Joseph Smith, the LDS scriptures, and the Restoration. While they are not the only theories that could be proposed, I believe they fall within a narrow range of theories that are consistent with the many facts presented in this essay. It is thus likely in my view that they are at least close to the truth despite the fact that some aspects of them may appear far-fetched at first glance.

"But how could a prophet, seer, and revelator lose any part of his testimony?" you might ask. One possibility is that his doubt was sparked by disappointment over the discrepancy between his lifelong expectation that modern prophets and apostles should be like the prophets of old and his experience of holding such callings for decades without receiving any extraordinary revelations or prophetic visions himself or hearing of any from his colleagues. Let's look at how wide this disparity could theoretically be.

Four years after Monson became an apostle, Hugh B. Brown of the First Presidency gave a Conference talk listing 19 "characteristics of a prophet... that any man who claims to be a prophet should have". Among these were the following:

- "He will boldly but humbly declare, 'God has spoken to me.'"
- "He will boldly declare, 'Thus saith the Lord!'"
- "He will predict future events in the name of the Lord, events that he could not control, events that only God could bring to pass."
- "He will do superhuman things, things that only a man inspired of God could do." (["The Profile of a Prophet"](#), Oct. 1967)

Such notions appear to be well-founded in LDS theology where they are supported even by scripture. For example, in 1831, Joseph Smith recorded a revelation that declared:

The duty of the President of the office of the High Priesthood is to preside over the whole church, and to **be like unto Moses**—Behold, here is wisdom; yea, to **be a seer, a revelator, a translator, and a prophet, having all the gifts of God** which he bestows upon the head of the church. (D&C 107:91-92)

These points and verses are true to the conceptions that members generally have of their presidents; hence rumors of Jesus visiting them in the Holy of Holies and in their Thursday temple sessions abound throughout Mormondom. But even members who are skeptical of such stories mostly believe that their leaders are at least receiving clear and direct revelations for the church on a regular basis.

Many of the words of these presidents themselves, however, seem to tell a different story. For example, in 1904, Joseph F. Smith gave this testimony under oath to the US Congress:

I have never pretended to **nor do I profess to have received revelations**. I never said I had a revelation except so far as God has shown to me that so-called Mormonism is God's divine truth; that is all. ([Congressional Edition, Volume 4932, p.99](#))

A week later, he told the Congress that he couldn't say whether he had received a revelation since he had become the president of the church (two and a half years prior) and then added:

If I live as I should in the line of my duties, I am susceptible, **I think**, of the **impressions** of the spirit of the lord upon my mind at any time, **just as any good Methodist or any other good church member** might be. And so far as that is concerned, I say yes; I have had impressions of the spirit upon my mind very frequently, but they are **not in the sense of revelations**. ([pp. 483-484](#))

In a similar fashion, Gordon B. Hinckley revealed in interviews with [Larry King](#), the [Australian Broadcasting Corporation](#), and the [San Francisco Chronicle](#) that his "revelations" were rare and contained "usually **no voice of any kind, but just a perception** in the mind", which put them in the same category as Smith's – "impressions" that "any good Methodist or any other good church member might" receive. He even went so far as to tell the [Washington Times](#) that "**revelation no longer comes by vision** but in the 'still, small voice,' like that heard by Elijah", which he later reiterated in an [Ensign article](#). Finally, his answers to questions even more significant were less than certain. When asked by King whether his "impressions" come from God, he replied "**I think so**", and when asked by the SF Chronicle whether he was a prophet, seer, and revelator, he answered "**I am so sustained**, yes. (Laughter)"

This is all consistent with what we have observed of the church's top leadership in general over the last century or so. If they received revelations and visions like Joseph Smith and ancient prophets allegedly did, it stands to reason that they would describe them to us like those earlier prophets did so that we can learn and strengthen our faith from them; however, they never do speak of such experiences nor do they make prophecies, "declare 'Thus saith the Lord'", or "do superhuman things" like they apparently should. Even the "priesthood revelation" of 1978 was little more than prayerful deliberation and voting among the brethren, motivated by circumstantial (and probably political) pressures [according to the apostle LeGrand Richards](#), who took part in the process. It's no wonder that the 2009 version of the *Gospel Principles* manual [changed all mentions](#) of the church's current apostles and prophets being "special witnesses of Jesus Christ" to make them say "special witnesses of **the name of** Jesus Christ". Boyd K. Packer – who at the time had been an apostle for 37 years – may have confirmed this demoted view of modern prophetic and apostolic mantles when he told the membership:

As General Authorities of the Church, **we are just the same as you are**, and you are just the same as we are. **You have the same access to the powers of revelation** for your families and for your work and for your callings **as we do**. ([“The Weak and the Simple of the Church”](#), Oct. 2007)

What he did not explain, however, is why only 15 of the church’s members are sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators if millions of others share their right to revelation (only within a smaller sphere of responsibility) or how this view can be squared with Brown’s list of “characteristics of a prophet”, the verses quoted from D&C 107, and other statements like these, not to mention the extraordinary abilities attributed to prophets in the scriptures. But unfortunately, this is a matter for another essay.

If Monson’s expectations of the prophetic mantle were once on par with those of the vast majority of believing church members, it would not be hard to see how discovering that reality falls short could have thrown his testimony of his own status as a prophet, seer, and revelator for a loop. Add to that some troubling information about church history (which the brethren seem to be aware of on a basic level – some probably more than others) and you’ve got yourself a president who avoids testifying of the Restoration and limits his testimonies to the bare basics.

Undoubtedly, some will say that, based on what they know about Monson, there’s no way he could be dishonest enough to speak disingenuously and advocate something he doesn’t know to be true. To this I would say that, to his credit, it seems like he’s actually trying to be as honest as he can without straying too far from the confines of acceptable Mormon speech. If he was totally comfortable with dishonesty, he would probably just go ahead and claim to know the things that nearly everyone else in the church testifies of (and then this paper wouldn’t exist). And any discomfort he does have can likely be soothed with ends-justifies-the-means thinking like the kind reflected in the LDS scriptures when God commanded Abraham to lie to the Egyptians (Abraham 2:22-25) and when He commanded Nephi to kill Laban (1 Nephi 4:10-18).

Furthermore, any degree of deception he is engaging in shouldn’t surprise us greatly since it is only a drop in the bucket of historical precedent, as shown by [this list of 152 documented examples of dishonesty](#) from the church and/or its leaders compiled by a longtime CES instructor, coordinator, and director. This is not a uniquely Mormon phenomenon, however. As the writer Minna Antrim once quipped, “The difference between a saint and a hypocrite is that one lies for his religion, the other by it.” (*Naked Truth and Veiled Allusions*, p. 30)

Hypothetically, if it is true that Monson’s testimony of the Restoration is lacking, it could be argued by some that this would preclude the church from being what it claims to be. For example, an argument like the following could be made:

- 1) If Monson is a prophet, then his priesthood authority and prophetic mantle were passed down to him from Joseph Smith (JS) through a chain of succession.

- 2) Therefore, if Monson doesn't believe that JS was a prophet, he doesn't believe that this authority or mantle really exist in the church and thus doesn't believe that he himself is a prophet.
- 3) If he doesn't believe that he himself is a prophet, he's not a prophet. This is because if he was a prophet, God would talk to him and he would thus know that he was a prophet. Therefore, if he doesn't believe he's a prophet, God's not talking to him, meaning he's not a prophet.
- 4) If Monson is not a prophet, JS was not a prophet. This is because, as shown earlier, in one of JS's revelations, he was apparently told that some of the duties of the president of the church are "to be like unto Moses" and "to be a seer, a revelator, a translator, and a prophet..." (D&C 107:91-92). Since Monson is the president or "head of the church" (assuming that Brigham Young was the rightful successor of Joseph Smith), if he is not a prophet, then this highly significant canonized revelation is false, making JS a false prophet.
- 5) If JS was a false prophet, the church is not true. This is because the divine calling and work of JS are the very foundation on which all of the church's teachings are built. Pull out this foundation and the rest crumbles.
- 6) Therefore, if Monson does not believe that JS was a prophet, the church is not what it claims to be.

Others may find this essay to be part of the fulfillment of this prophecy from the Doctrine and Covenants:

For it shall come to pass that the inhabitants of Zion shall judge all things pertaining to Zion. And liars and hypocrites shall be proved by them, and they who are not apostles and prophets shall be known. (64:38-39)

Conclusion & Proposal

In summary, let us look at what Thomas Monson has given us in the way of testimonies in his 61 General Conference talks over the last eight years (his entire tenure as church president plus the two years prior). He has:

- Urged us to gain and strengthen our testimonies of unique foundational church doctrines ("Priesthood Power", Apr. 2011; "Believe, Obey, Endure", Apr. 2012)
- Instructed us how to do so ("How Firm a Foundation", Oct. 2006; "Dare to Stand Alone", Oct. 2011)
- Encouraged us to bear those testimonies (see the sections "Why It Matters" and "Observation #5")
- Told stories of people who've borne such testimonies ("Why It Matters")
- Talked about how he had a "testimony concerning the Church and our beliefs" and bore it when he was younger ("Dare to Stand Alone", Oct. 2011)
- Testified of universal religious principles and relatively mundane ones ("Observation #2")
- Testified boldly and fervently of basic Christian doctrines ("Observation #1")

- Come close to testifying of unique foundational doctrines (“Observation #8”, “Potential Objections”, “Alternative Explanations”)

Thus he appears to have done everything that can be done with testimonies short of what is arguably the most important and commonly performed in the church – actually bearing testimony of its core proprietary teachings.

Throughout this essay, we have seen that this persistent neglect to vocally testify to the world of the precepts that separate the church Monson presides over from every other religious body in the world is problematic. It seems to suggest that he does not have complete faith in these precepts, which some could argue casts serious doubt on their veracity and/or on the legitimacy of his calling.

In light of all that has been presented here, believing church members may find it worthwhile to reflect on the following questions:

- Why would God’s living mouthpiece not fervently testify of the very things that make him God’s mouthpiece and that make his church God’s only true church? Especially in the face of scriptures, Conference talks, and other correlated church materials which command us all to bear our testimonies of these doctrines and even condemn those of us who don’t? (“Why It Matters”)
- Is it conceivable that he really does have a testimony and just has some mysterious yet innocuous reason for not bearing it?
- If it’s true that he doesn’t have a complete testimony of the Restoration, would it still be possible for the church to be everything it claims to be?
- What can we do to get to the bottom of what’s going on here?

Regarding the last question, I propose that we start a petition asking him to list the doctrines that he firmly knows to be true at the next General Conference. We could also get Utah media outlets to report on this phenomenon in order to boost awareness of it among members or offer a cash reward for anyone who can find a testimony of a core distinctive doctrine in any of the talks in question. Whatever we do, we should make it clear that our main objectives are to discover the truth on where Monson stands in his beliefs and to give him an opportunity to talk openly with us. Let’s also make sure he knows that regardless of his response, we will appreciate his honesty and willingness to hear and answer our pleas.

I have been informed by the originator of another petition that letters and petitions like these will only be seen by Monson if they're approved, first by Michael Otterson, the managing director of Public Affairs for the church, and second by the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (Otterson himself told her this in October 2011). Because of this (and for more obvious reasons), such things should be written as respectfully and sincerely as possible.

Let me conclude by suggesting that this essay is only the beginning of something larger – a new area of research into Mormonism where the testimonies of other LDS prophets and apostles, both living and dead, are analyzed in a similar fashion. The findings of such research, aside from providing a window of sorts into the hearts and minds of these men,

will potentially have an impact on both the strength and implications of the case being made here. It's not often that new areas of research open up in the field of religious studies, so this is an opportunity that I hope others will take notice of and contribute to.

Note: This paper was going to be revised to claim that Monson has not testified of *any* unique church doctrines of *any* kind – not just foundational ones – but one single instance was found about which it could be argued that he was doing just that. Near the beginning of a talk on the plan of salvation, he said “The Lord has declared that ‘the spirit and the body are the soul of man’” (“The Race of Life”, Apr. 2012). This statement quotes D&C 88:15 and by saying “The Lord has declared” it, he taught the unique LDS doctrine that this modern verse contains the word of God. The testifying of it arguably came in the conclusion of the talk when Monson said “I testify that those things of which I have spoken are true”. Obviously, this testimony was very indirect and the allusion to the unique doctrine in question was quite trivial, but in order to not run the risk of weakening the paper’s thesis, I have decided to leave everything as is. To some, it will appear that there were additional distinctive teachings in the talk as well; however, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that nothing else in it was exclusive to Mormon theology. Finally, it may be worth noting that out of the 61 talks in question, this was the only one he closed with a testimony of the entire contents of the talk.

Additional Reading

- [A memo by Grant Palmer](#), a historian, author, and former LDS Institute director, describing a series of meetings he recently held with a General Authority in which the GA made some shocking claims regarding the church’s top 15 leaders, some of which call into question whether they all still have their testimonies intact.
- [An update from a Salt Lake City attorney](#) who spoke with Palmer that partially confirms and clarifies some of these claims. [Here is the blog article](#) it refers to.
- [A critical analysis of these claims](#) by a former managing editor and current contributor at MormonThink.com
- [An article](#) discussing conflicting statements from church presidents on the importance and prevalence of modern revelation that ultimately asks the question “Does the church need revelation?”
- [An in-depth discussion](#) of various issues regarding modern LDS prophets in general

— TruthIsReason, a graduate of Brigham Young University

Please send questions and comments to TruthIsReason7@gmail.com

This is an updated and expanded version of an article originally posted to Facebook on January 7, 2012 by the same author and then published on www.mormoncanon.com on April 11, 2012.